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ABSTRACT

This presentation challenges the implicit assumption, in "A Nation at Risk" and other recent national reports on education, that elementary schools share the blame for the deterioration of educational quality. Examples are first provided of unsubstantiated generalizations presupposing that elementary schools share in the culpability attributed to secondary education. It is then argued, and evidence is cited in support of the contention, that elementary schools are in fact doing an effective job of teaching. It is stated that the real problem for elementary schools is the lack of adequate public relations to communicate their effectiveness to the community. The effectiveness of schools derives in large part from the school climate; therefore, a self-perpetuating model is outlined for building a school climate and selling it. The goals should be to inform the public that the elementary schools are effective, while simultaneously and thereby developing the morale and confidence of both the school staff and the community. (TE)

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BELIEFS THAT MAKE THE DIFFERENCE

ARE THE NATIONAL REPORTS REALLY TALKING TO THE ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS?

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1985

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I've been told that every good presentation needs an "ice-breaker" - some activity to put the audience at ease. Well, I don't have one, but we are going to play a "pretend" game.

Pretend you're at a social gathering with your wife/husband. You're standing in the corner with a drink. You notice that another couple has arrived and the hostess is introducing them around. They are getting close and you overhear the hostess introduce the couple to a doctor. She mentions that John plays golf and the two men begin to talk a little about golf. The wife says nothing. The next introduction is with an attorney and again the two men engage in conversation. The wife says nothing. Now it's our turn...my wife and I are introduced and the hostess mentions that I'm a school principal. The man says, "High school principal?" I answer, "No, elementary school principal." Silence...until his wife excitedly says, "Do you know what happened to me last week?," and begins to relate the story and ends with, "What do you think?" Trying to be polite, I give her my <u>professional</u> opinion. She responds by saying, "I see your point, <u>but</u> don't you think ...?"

These kinds of incidents happen to me often. Other professions seem to project an aura of respectability that we don't have. Other professionals are rarely challenged, yet we seem to be fair game for anyone who has a child, knows a child, or somehow comes in contact with a child. Everyone knows our job better than we do. Everyone has the answer for every educational question or a solution for every educational problem.

For almost twenty-five years I've been in elementary education and it seems, for all of that time I've either had to defend my profession or apologize for it. When people see me, a **BIG GUY** - "jock type", they automatically think I should be a high school principal. When I say, "No, elementary school," they say, "Oh, grammar school." Elementary schools haven't been called "grammar schools" for almost fifty years. I think it's a "put-down" and I'm tired of being put down. I'm tired of apologizing. We do a good job and I'm proud ot it!

When "A Nation at Risk" first came on the scene and was then followed by other national reports, I fell into the same trap as everyone else in the country. I believed them! I could see some of the things they were alluding to. I began to question the quality of education, in general, and my school, in particular. Then suddenly I said, "Whoa, here I go again defending myself and my profession." Rather than do that, I decided that perhaps I'd better take a closer look.

One of the first things I used was a publication put out by the New Jersey School Boards Association. Its title was, simply, "Summaries of Educational Reports." It is a summary of twelve of the major reports throughout the country. The format generally lists the methodology, basic assumptions, view of the present educational system, and recommendations. What I found as I read through this document is that they are not talking to us, you and me, elementary principals (elementary schools). They are really directing their criticism toward high schools and institutions of higher learning. "A Nation at Risk", the first report I reviewed listed thirteen indicators of risk. I combined scholastic aptitude and achievement and listed twelve. They are:

- International comparisons of student achievement.
- Twenty three million American adults are illiterate.
- Thirteen percent of all 17-year olds are illiterate.
- Achievement of high school students on standardized tests is lower than twenty six years ago.
- Gifted students do not match their tested ability.
- S.A.T. scores, as well as College Board Achievement scores have declined.
- Number of students demonstrating superior achievement on S.A.T.'s declined.
- Many 17-year olds do not possess the "higher order" intellectual skills.
- Decline in science achievement scores of U.S. 17-year olds.
- Remedial mathematics courses in 4-year colleges increased seventy two percent from 1975 to 1980.
- Average tested achievement of college graduates is lower.
- Complaints of business and military leaders that remedial education and training is required for reading, writing, spelling, and computation.

If each indicator was taken one by one, any number of explanations could be offered to explain away the reasons for those statements. Interestingly, none of these indicators state, imply, or infer a direct relationship to the elementary schools. And what's more important, any explanation of the reasons would certainly not be related to the elementary school.

Another prestigious report, "Horace's Compromise: The Dilemma of the American High School Today" speaks of only what the title says, high school today. Theodore R. Sizer, the author, states his view of the present educational system as:

- The goals of secondary schools are too numerous and ill defined.

- Many students complete high school unprepared for life.
- Little incentive is offered for students to challenge themselves with hard academic work.
- Students are tracked too early into vocational education or magnet programs.
- Fractionalized curricula doesn't allow enough time on task for adequate comprehension and skill mastery.
- The teaching profession has a limited career line and salaries and benefits are not competitive with positions in other fields that require comparable preparation.

Those statements may or may not be true; he's the researcher, I'm not. The point is, in reference to this paper, that those statements are generalizations with little reference or relationship to elementary schools.

Ernest Boyer's contribution to the report syndrome is his book called "High School: A Report on Secondary Education in America, The Carnegie Report for the Advancement of Teaching." His view of our educational system is more direct and more specific:

- Ten to fifteen percent of the high schools provide perhaps the finest education in the world.
- Between twenty to thirty percent of the students mark time or drop out.
- Schools lack leadership and the clarity of goals needed to avoid declining standards.
- High schools do not have a sense of purpose and a vision that is larger than the school day.

If we look at reference number three, it states Schools lack leaders. While the title and subject is high school, this generalization that Schools lack leadership draws us into a picture where we do not necessarily belong. If you look closely at the fourth reference, could that really be said about your school, your teachers?

I love this next report. It's called "Making the Grade - A

Report of the Twentiety Century Fund.[3] It was put together by the Twentiety Century Task Force on Federal Elementary and Secondary Education Policy. Their view is:

- By almost every measure, the commitment and competency of teachers, student test scores, truancy and drop-out rates, crimes of violence, the performance of our schools falls far short of expectations.
- Continued failure by the schools to perform their traditional role adequately, together with a failure to respond to the emerging needs of the 1980's, may have disastrous consequences for this nation.
- This threatened disaster can be averted if there is a national commitment to excellence in our public schools.

Do you believe that first statement? Crimes of Violence! Conceivably, if there was an outbreak of hangnails on ladies' toes, they wouldn't blame the manufacturers who make millions on designer shoes. They would say that teachers and school nurses didn't offer proper instruction on healthy foot care.

This type of generalization just infuriates me. There may be problems but not to the extent that we in education are to blame for all the wrongs of our country. The other reports are little better in their condemnation of the school. The words may be couched in softer terms but the result is the same. Important to this paper, however, is that most statements are generalizations and the specific statements are directed toward the high schools. With reference to the elementary schools, it is "guilt by association."

In the March issue of Educational Leadership, an article entitled "The American High School at the Crossroads" by Daniel Tanner, refers to our continually shifting of emphasis from one initiative to another depending on the climate of the decade. He speaks of the various reports and implies that they may be clouding the issues and

are contradictory. However, Dr. Tanner makes the same mistake as most writers. He generalizes in making his point when he says, "In fixing blame on our schools." This statement was a reference to "A Nation at Risk." Fixing blame on our schools implies all schools - elementary and secondary. I'm just not convinced that we (elementary) are a part of any blame.

This is only one example but other examples abound. It is rare, if at all, when a writer differentiates between elementary and secondary schools.

The above examples annoy me but what annoys me most about this whole "guilt trip" is that the national reports have put us (elementary) on, are those people in elementary education who, rather than defend their operation, hop on the band wagon. In the November issue of the Kappan, an article appeared called "Gummibears Instead of Sour Grapes: A Positive Response to the National Reports on School Reform." The author states "it was clear to the administrators of the Glendale Elementary School District that effective secondary education begins in elementary schools." She then goes on to describe their program for improvement of the elementary schools. While no one can argue with the statement that effective secondary schools begin in the elementary schools, developing an improvement program presupposes there is something wrong in the first place. Thus far, no one has adequately proved that to me.

In fact, one of the most influential researchers of our times, John Goodlad, says in his national research project "A Place Called School" that:

> Desirable teacher and teaching traits were more evident in the early elementary grades and declined steadily thereafter with a

> sharp decrease in the middle school. Just when strong support is necessary to keep adolescents involved in learning, there was increasingly less use of teacher praise and support for learning, less corrective guidance, a narrowing range of pedigogical techniques, and declining participation by students in determining the daily conduct of their education.

Goodlad was not less critical of the institution of schooling, but his views were more specific and more direct, and his solutions were more positive; and that's mostly what I'm interested in doing - being positive.

There is a good deal of evidence which states that the problems with our school systems are not in the elementary schools. Harold Hodgekinson, in his 1984 talk at the I.D.E.A. Fellows Program, states that in the reports, researchers refuse to recognize positive research and seem to want schools to fail. A paragraph from "A Nation at Risk" seems to bear this out. They say:

> If an unfriendly power had attempted to impose on America, the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war. As it stands, we have allowed this to happen to ourselves.

Hodgekinson further states that in the elementary schools across the country, performance is up over the past decade. In his talk, he refers to an article he wrote for Kappan. The article, "What's Right with Education?" won him an award by the Education Press Association for his article on success of the American Public School. He says, "A funny thing about the award, mine was the only one entered."

In an article from Kappan, "Closing the Gap: A Historical Perpective on the Effectiveness of Compensatory Education," the author reinforces Hodgekinson with their statements that the recent research shows that the Title I Head Start Programs are responsible for the dramatic gains made between 1970 and 1980. The National Assessment of Education Progress shows dramatic gains in reading among 9-year olds.

In math, there is no significant difference in 9-year olds but there is significance among 13 and 17-year olds. The achievement of 13-year olds is up while the achievement of 17-year olds is down. Another piece of data from the Second International Science Study shows that at grade five, students were at the plus 6.1% from 1970 to 1983.

The problem as stated in the reports, among other things, is ineffective schools, mediocre instruction, and poorly trained staff. I believe I've made a case for the fact that the elementary schools are doing an effective job. If that be true, our problem is with <u>not</u> communicating our excellence or effectiveness to the local community as well as the community at large.

Interestingly, along the lines of communication, two points come to mind. On the one hand, Gallup's most recent poll shows that more than fifty percent of the parents had given their local schools a grade of A or B while in the Metropolitan Life Survey of the American Teacher, the majority of teachers rate parental support from fair to poor.

What does that mean? It means we have to do a better job of selling ourselves. Everyone is familiar with the achievements of the Japanese in the field of technology. Most people overlook their major fields of excellence which is "packaging." They could not have been nearly as successful without "selling" their product better than anyone else. We don't sell our product! How we can sell our product becomes the issue.

Our product is effective schools. Research says that effective schools are directly related to positive school climate. In an article, "School Climate: Key to Excellence," the author, Robert

Eicholtz, says:

> School climate is the key to excellence and effectiveness in our schools regardless of the socio-economic or ethnic composition of the student bodies.

He states:

> Positive school climate results in high motivation in students and staff. It is the catalyst that makes people willing to do more to help the institution and its people reach their objectives.

Goodlad, in his research, says it in a different way, but relates to the same principle.

> A school is a social system. Improvement requires a focus on the entire school, not just teachers, principals, curriculum, or any other single issue.

Goodlad further states:

> The preoccupation solely with student achievement takes away from curriculum, pedology, student-teacher relations, school and class climate, principal-teacher relations, parental satisfaction and dissatisfaction, and many other important matters.

Finally Eicholtz Says:

> Positive school climate results from team effort involving the certificated and classified staff members, students, parents, district staff, and a supportive school board.

I propose we build school climate and sell it. To do that, I've set up my own model. It's simple and it's doable. It works for me. It will work for you. However, you have to decide whether you really want to do it. It's your model. It requires only commitment from you. The procedure for implementation is skillful handling of staff and parents; yet, you must understand that you are the focal point. Everything eminates from you. You're the director, the choreographer, and the cheerleader. Those that you are directing must perceive you as the hardest-working person in the building. You ask no one to do anything you are not willing to do yourself.

My model looks like this:

I Goals

A. Inform the public and the educational community that the elementary schools are effective.

B. Develop the morale/confidence of school staff.

C. Develop the morale/confidence of the community.

II Objectives

A. Community and teachers working together.

1. Short term activities.

2. Long term activities.

III Implementation

A. Set the task.

B. Inform the people concerned.

C. Do the task.

As you can see when goal A is successful, goals B and C will follow. It's a self perpetuating model.

The heart of the model are the objectives. You must find a way for parents/teachers to cooperatively work together with mutual respect. The short term activity is a start for developing that. Short term activities are those activities which are successfully completed within a specific time frame (generally the time frame for short term activities should be brief.) Long term activities could be ongoing activities throughout the year and conceivably might become an integral part of the school program.

"Public Relations" is the Japanese packaging of our model. Public relations is also a "you do" task. Without it, you have nothing. You didn't sell the product. Public relations provide the

basis for a job well done. If re-establishing the public's confidence in our schools and the professionals who oversee them is vital, then public relations is a most important activity.

On the surface, implementation seems self explanatory. However, it is at this point where skillful handling of people becomes imperative. You have to choose the individuals who can do the job. You have to select those who can work together. Choice is important because, above all, no matter how small or large the project, you must be successful. Success breeds success. Sussess breads confidence. Success breeds mutual trust. Trust leads to positive school climate which becomes the catalyst to make people willing to do more.